

Criticism: a Continuum of Reflections Is it a Rare Commodity?

Asian societies tend to dismiss criticism as an unnecessary contribution to social and political development. Much has not been made of it as the region achieves higher standard of living. How should one approach criticism – by whom and for whom? What is its place in the theatre, the arts and society today? The following is an email correspondence on the topic between Dr. Paul Rae (from England; based in Singapore) and Prof. Chetana Nagavajara (Thailand; scholar of Comparative Literature), prior to their participation in the colloquium, 'Critically Speaking: Asia & Europe Contemporary Performing Arts Colloquium' (Singapore). Artists and academics from Asia and Europe were brought together to share experiences and opinions on creativity, analysis, aesthetics, economics, etc.. Paul Rae and Chetana Nagavajara corresponded with each other in preparation of holding the discussion session, 'Critics on Criticism'.

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From: Paul Rae
To: Chetana Nagavajara
Date: 3 May 2005

Dear Chetana

Hello there. I'm beginning a dialogue on the themes that we're meant to address at the Singapore event in June. I should start by introducing myself, telling you who I am, but perhaps instead I will tell you where I am, and I'll leave the "who" for you to interpret as you see fit. I am sitting in an office in Singapore. On my desk are a calculator (because I worry about money), a hosepipe nozzle (because we have a pigeon shit problem on the outside of our building), a draft of some guidelines for the classification of theatre performances in Singapore (because the people from the government came to ask me what I thought of them), some DV tapes of rehearsals of my performances (that I haven't got round to archiving), a phone with a crackly connection, a diary open at the instruction "write to Chetana", assorted stationary, and, coincidentally, a CD of Thai music. I have no idea about what

it says on the CD cover, but it was one of seven that I bought in a Thai bootleg CD shop in Singapore's Golden Mile Complex (on Beach Road) a couple of months ago, after discovering a website that recommended various *Morlam*¹ albums. I haven't listened to this one yet, so I'm going to put it on now, and it will be the soundtrack to the rest of this email.

The office I'm in is a shophouse in the Little India area of Singapore. Upstairs is a space that my theatre company – spell#7 (www.spell7.net) – use to rehearse and perform in. Downstairs, the three of us – Kaylene (who is my wife), Ben and I – administer the company, and do the various things that we need to do to make some money: freelance journalism, preparation for teaching at the university, consulting. We also run an audio tour of the area, which I hope you will find time to do while you are here!

On the subjects of criticism and criticality, I am perhaps more interested in the latter, which I understand to be a kind of expanded criticism. This is because, although I do review from time to time, I'm neither a serial nor "systematic" reviewer. Expanded criticism is something that is sorely lacking in relation to criticism in Singapore. It is not that there aren't

people involved in writing criticism; in fact, there is a website which has been going since 1996, and a sense of accretion is just starting to make its presence felt in some of the more recent reviews (www.inkpot.com/theatre/). However, something about the general tenor of reviews here seems to be bound in with the immediacy and singularity of the event, such that it always seems more important to comment on who was good and who was bad and whether or not the lighting was nice, than to explore the themes of the piece, or to understand it in a broader context.

Not being systematic in my reviewing, as I said earlier, I nevertheless understand the totality of the work I do – academic writing, theatre-making, even teaching – as both a creative and a critical practice. It feels like the idea of a critical practice is something that one can pursue in a number of different ways: it's not defined by a particular form, but rather the way in which one is able to sustain a certain perspective and approach across a range of works and events. I like to think that this is what might be meant by criticality, and I like to think it is possible!

There are many other things I could say to develop this, but maybe I'll just finish on a slightly different note. At the end of last week, the Malaysian writer and theatre maker Krishen Jit passed away. He had been ill for a while, and a few weeks ago, I had to go to a conference in the US, and then one in Wales. I had heard that he was not well, and so I took his book of collected writings, 'An Uncommon Position' with me. I had this feeling that if he should

¹ An ancient form of music popular in the Northeast of Thailand and Laos.

die while I was away, I might need it: that I would turn to his writings to remember him. In the event, I carried his book round the world and back, and I never opened it! In retrospect, though, maybe that was the point. It was more a kind of homage than anything else. And maybe, too, it expresses some kind of faith in criticism. I'm always carrying lots of books around – my wife jokingly calls it 'the burden of knowledge' – but that image of something you have with you, something that may be an encumbrance, that you may not actually need or use when you plan to, but whose potential (we might say "potential energy", and here I think of Josef Beuys describing his treated books as "batteries") remains present and actual; as does, right now, the memory of Krishen.

The CD is on the last track. Although the woman singer is much more garishly dressed than Jintara Poonlarp,² she sings more gently: in this case, those are the only critical criteria I have to go on.

Best regards
Paul

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From: **Chetana Nagavajara**
To: **Paul Rae**
Date: **10 May 2005**

Dear Paul,

Lest you might think that I am not serious about our dialogue, I am sending you two brochures describing what my colleagues and I have been doing. The documents deal with our research project with a very pretentious title, 'Criticism as an Intellectual Force in Contemporary Society', the second phase of which is due for completion by June 30, 2005.

Your message is so rich in ideas that I shall need some time to reflect upon it. I envy the freedom you enjoy as a freelancer and as an artist. I went to study in England and Germany as a young man (many, many years ago) on a Thai government's scholarship, and although officially retired, I have been relentlessly drafted into various commissions by the bureaucracy here.

With regard to the theatre, I went as a child to performances of our folk theatre, *Likay*³, with occasional excursions to our National Theatre to see

² Well-known *Morlam* female singer from the Northeast of Thailand.

³ *Likay* is one of the main dramatic art forms of Thailand, which is popular and often performed at village festivals in the south of the country. It includes dance, stories, singing, comedy and ham acting, with colourful costumes.

classical dance drama. My first exposure to Western theatre was in the late 1950s, when I was doing my A Level in Manchester. There in the midst of the slums of Moss Side was 'The Playhouse', frequented also by the working class and black people. It made a deep impression on me, and up to today the theatre remains for me classless, or at least I wish it to be so. As a Germanist, I have had to study the German classics, and do enjoy going to the Burgtheater every time I go to Vienna. I have written quite a bit on Brecht, as I admire his aspirations regarding a classless theatre, which somehow he never quite succeeded in bringing to life. A student performance in English of 'Die Ausnahme und die Regel' (with original music) won me over. In 1987, I crossed the Berlin Wall every day for over a month to work in the Brecht Archive, and was a regular visitor to the Berliner Ensemble. I still go to Berlin almost every year, and must confess that I am no friend of the 'Regietheater'. I have enumerated all these experiences not to impress you, but to prove that I love the theatre, but from a recipient's end. I have had no practical experience whatsoever.

As far as criticism is concerned, an amateur of the arts cannot help but have critical views of his various experiences. The Thai experience may be interesting to colleagues from other countries. When we write criticism (and some of the newspapers and magazines have been kind enough to allot space for it), we don't really care how many people read our works. The notion of a "public", known to the West, is rather alien to us.

Thailand today is a consumer society through and through, and everything is manipulated by media moguls, who in turn are controlled by the present government (the *Morlam* you have been listening to may not survive for long).

I love going to the National Gallery [in Bangkok] on Sunday mornings, because there are only two persons present, namely myself and a watchman! By 10 o'clock, we might be joined by two or three more people. So my colleagues and I view criticism as an "independent discourse", not necessarily meant to serve as a guide to the "public". As regards the theatre, by the time a review appears, the last performance will have already taken place. There is sufficient audience for only a few performances.

Criticism must of necessity cater to readers who want to look backward, or if we are arrogant enough, we can say that we write for posterity as well!

⁴ 'Regietheater', literally 'director's theatre', refers to a German speciality which gives the director absolute freedom in interpretation, resulting in highly inspired performances as well as dire aberrations.

I shall try to address more of the issues raised in my next mail. I am still not so clear about criticality. I am tempted to treat it as "critical culture", but that might be too broad and too vague.

Warm regards,
Chetana

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From: **Paul Rae**
To: **Chetana Nagavajara**
Date: **14 May 2005**

Dear Chetana

Many thanks for your mail, and for putting me to shame (as if I needed reminding) for my English parochialism. We really are hopeless when it comes to substantial engagement with continental European theatre culture, and even though I speak French, I feel woefully ill-informed about what's going on there and elsewhere beyond the shores of my sometime-homeland. On the other hand, I have made a couple of madcap trips specifically to see performances that I thought might be useful for my PhD: once to Utrecht to see *Ea Sola*, and once to Vienna, to see something at the Schauspielhaus. In the end, I wrote on neither, and at least one of them wasn't good at all. Catching an early morning flight back from Amsterdam less than twenty-four hours after arriving, and having spent the night in the airport for want of accommodation funds, I really did wonder what kind of idiot would travel so far and at such inconvenience to sit in a near-empty theatre in Holland for eighty minutes of dance-theatre in Vietnamese. It's a cautionary tale for sure, although I don't know whether it's one about my own obsessions, or the perverse allure of the theatrical event.

I was very interested to read the two documents you attached about the projects relating to your research, 'Criticism as an Intellectual Force in Contemporary Society'. There are concerns there that chime with a number of ideas I have begun to tussle with. So at the risk of sounding rather self-absorbed, I'd like to try and think through some of these thoughts, as refracted through those documents.

Since Krishen's death – and two years ago, that of Kuo Pao Kun, who was a very significant figure in Singapore theatre and intellectual life – I have been thinking about the idea of the public intellectual. Goodness knows they're useful to have around, but I do find this notion a little troubling, since – given how rarely the epithet is applied – the implication seems to be that to be

intellectual in public is something of an aberration: it is, at the very least, the exception, rather than the rule. Add to that the persistent need – stronger in some cultures than others – for father figures, even amongst so-called progressive communities such as artists, and we end up with the conjunction of “public” and “intellectual” being almost tautologous – a bit like when you try to push the two similarly-charged ends of a magnet together – which can only be wrought together by these rare, heroic titans in the white-hot forges of their Mighty Minds.

My question is: why not ‘intellectual publics’? Why not take ideas as a given in society; something that exists *in general* rather than being owned by an Oracle? It is, of course, telling that you should describe the title of your research projects as “very pretentious”, because there is a pervasive suspicion in a great many societies (England included, though not France) of ideas and the use of the intellect. With similar trepidation, I have been asking myself: could I establish a project entitled ‘Intellectual Publics’, whose primary aim is to promote active art

and ideas in the public realm? And, of course, I answer to myself: probably not. ‘Intellectual Publics’ is already too forbidding. It has to be something with more pizzazz, and less pomp. But at the same time, the basic intuition feels right. Is society so specialized that ideas belong only in universities? Never mind that a great many of those ideas pertain to society at large, the professionalisation of arts scholarship threatens to give a new and even more constraining meaning to the term ‘intellectual property’. This can’t be right.

In other words, I’m trying to work out what happens if you pursue academically-informed work in non-academic contexts. I guess the most straightforward answer is that the work will change and so too (hopefully) will the contexts. It’s here that I am struck by your phrases “criticism should function as far as possible as a public activity”, and “turn criticism into a public act”. I really like these almost self-evident observations, because they suggest how the actualisation of an ‘intellectual public’ might change the nature of intellectual work. One of Hannah Arendt’s bugbears (influenced, as in many things, by Heidegger) was the historical primacy of reflection over action in Western philosophy, and it’s a hierarchy that still seems very much alive. In today’s *Straits Times*⁵, there’s a column entitled ‘Want Political Change? Go Beyond Words’. The journalist writes:

“Many Singaporeans have clamoured for more political openness, greater guarantees of political freedoms or changes to electoral laws. Many of us are content to just point out the flaws, without taking action. We remain in our cosy corners – in the media, in academia, in the arts – and grumble.”

Later, she makes her point: “While the optimists and cynics argue the case out, realistic Singaporeans would do well to go beyond verbal activism (talk) to social activism (act).”

⁵ An English-language daily newspaper in Singapore.

Much as I loathe to admit it, I am tempted to agree with her. But at this point, it is worth reminding ourselves that not only is social activism somewhat constrained in Singapore, but the extreme pragmatism of the Republic's leaders means that there has been no substantive "verbal activism" for several decades. The *Straits Times* article is accompanied by an illustration that is inadvertently ironic. Two figures: one leans on a placard that says "TALK", a bystander to the other, who poses as if in a political demonstration, waving aloft the placard that says "ACT". Suffice to say, in Singapore, demonstrations don't happen.

The challenge to 'turn criticism into a public act' gets us beyond these constraints. It's really tricky, but it holds the promise that both criticism and the public might benefit, as well as that which is critiqued, of course. I don't really know how to proceed, but re-conceiving criticism, or critical practice, as an act is an important first step. I know that our notions of what 'criticism' may mean in this discussion may be different, and I have also elided academic writing with criticism above. However, maybe I can finish with something that draws us onto common ground. Earlier today – at the risk of sounding "very pretentious" – I opened at random, as I occasionally do, the Selected Essays of the art critic John Berger, whose writing I greatly admire. The first sentence I read began: "I am thinking in front of Giorgione's Tempest ...". I couldn't get much further than the first half of the first sentence! I've got no idea what Giorgione's Tempest looks like, or even whether it's a painting or a sculpture, but that wonderful glitch, "thinking in front of" and then of course writing it down – that's it! That is a clue as to how criticism becomes act; becomes public act; becomes active without disdaining reflection. And here, I recall an image of you, whom I have not met, moving through the National Gallery on a quiet Sunday morning, nodding a hello to the security guard, and thinking in front of ...?

Best regards
Paul

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From: Chetana Nagavajara
To: Paul Rae
Date: 17 May 2005

Dear Paul,

Thanks for you latest mail. I can't help feeling a little flattered that you have taken our research project seriously. Not many Western colleagues have done that!

Before I take up the points you raised in your mail, allow me to address some of the issues to be discussed:

Criticism – for whom and by whom?

Our experience has been that those who write criticism do not quite know who their readers are. "Letters to the Editor" normally touch on other issues than the arts, and most certainly are not reactions to the critical reviews published. The notion of a "reading public" is vague indeed, as far as criticism in Thailand is concerned. There are no "professional critics" in the sense known to the West. We have amateurs, mostly academics, who write as they please (myself included); or else we have journalists who are compelled by their bosses to write previews rather than reviews, and I know one or two who have been cautioned that if they chose to write reviews at all, they are not supposed to say anything negative. The performing arts rely heavily on sponsorship by business concerns, and an adverse criticism can bring about curtailment in income from advertisements. The predicament of another self-appointed "professional critic" is even more pitiable: this pale and exhausted young man writes about twelve pieces a week. When he comes to our seminars, he has to leave early in order to get his next piece to the press. Film criticism is the only form of criticism that perhaps has a regular readership, because there is a cinema-going public, whereas the theatre is just something extraneous. People need some guidance, and demand "rating" from newspapers as well: film criticism complies.

When compiling our Anthologies of Criticism in the four areas, namely literature, visual arts, theatre and music, it was difficult to draw on journalistic criticism, and works by "amateurs" figure rather prominently alongside translations of works by distinguished foreign critics. In the visual arts, practitioners have to write criticism because art historians in this country are positivists through and through, and do not consider criticism as part of their professional agenda.

This certainly is not a healthy situation by any standard. When we turn to the "receiving" end, the state of affairs is even more alarming. A colleague of mine has been engaged in a "reception research", interviewing people who have been given samples of criticism to read (he could not have worked with a "population" conversant with criticism anyway). A number of interviewees, including students who practise the specific arts, do not usually read criticism. Some have no general reading skill to start with. Many cannot understand discursive prose, having been brought up on comics. The problem facing criticism in Thailand today is not essentially a problem directly related to criticism as such. We have to deal with a dwindling **READING CULTURE**. One thing which is encouraging is that those who read criticism are simply those who read. They love to read, anything. So this rather confirms our general conclusion about reading culture. When I go to the theatre or to the concert, some of these die-hards would come up to me and start a conversation. Their interests are wide indeed, and their reading lists are long and varied.

When I spoke of criticism as an independent or autonomous discourse in my last mail, I was not just playing with words.

What makes a critique poor or effective?

Again, I can only speak from experience. Good criticism is generated by contact with challenging works of art. If it is to be considered contemporary, its relevance should not be restricted to the originating environment or society. If I understand Raymond Williams correctly, the following statement can also support our aspirations as critics: "The conditions of production thus always include the conditions of making a text contemporary: to forget this would be to fall into a mere sociologism of the originating condition. All the forces which keep the text current are among its conditions of production."⁶ (Politics and Letters, 1981, p. 345).

The negative side of the Thai experience somehow contributes towards the consciousness on the part of a critic that he is addressing future generations, a very pretentious claim again! But without this kind of idealistic approach, we would not be writing criticism at all. It may be futile to speak in absolute terms about good or bad, poor or effective criticism. How can we be so sure that we have written a good piece of criticism? What I am trying to say here is that good intentions may not be irrelevant after all, if the critic has had sufficient experience with works of arts as well as with the critical discourse.

Is there a crisis in criticism in Asia today?

I cannot speak for Asia. But in Thailand today we are going through a very critical period. If one turns one's attention to politics, one can simply say that there is no dearth of criticism; there is too much of it even. But sometimes, critics of politics set their final aim on toppling their opponents. Criticism of the arts is different: we criticise artists in the hope that they will continue to improve themselves and produce better works! I am lapsing into an "intentional fallacy" again.

What are the factors determining the current state of criticism in the theatre, the arts and society?

As I mentioned in my previous communication, the consumer society does not need criticism. It wants to bewitch people through publicity. Criticism militates

⁶ The statement by Raymond Williams applies to literary works, meaning that a piece of writing contains elements that will make it survive into subsequent ages. Chetana has transposed his remark to the field of criticism, implying that good criticism will survive in the same way too. Chetana explains that although one writes criticism of works of art, good criticism too contains elements that transcend its original links with specific works of art, and attains the level of an "independent discourse". This kind of thinking gives immense encouragement to critics who may be addressing contemporary issues but whose impact may well be appreciated in subsequent ages.

against people being duped so easily, whereas the consumer society simply wants people to consume, uncritically. I don't know whether you have ever watched a Thai soap opera? It is a genre that critics don't want to waste their time on, which is not right. Critics would rather leave this form of entertainment to sociologists or media researchers. We have been guilty in this respect. But who would want to sit through twenty-four installments of a soap opera? It might be too old-fashioned to talk about the ills of capitalism. It is not that capitalism leaves no room for criticism. Capitalism is smarter than that; it lets you exhaust yourselves out and continues its own way, unperturbed.

In what frames can “criticality” be effectively approached and discussed?

I am not so familiar with the term “criticality”. I assume it means critical spirit or critical culture. Again, from our experience in Thailand, the “productive” side, in spite of its shortcomings, is not really in a sorry state of affairs: distinguished works of art continue to be produced, strangely enough, considering the cultural and social environment (I shall discuss this issue another time). But it is the receiving end that makes us worry.

The public is ready to be duped by the media whose machinations are very sophisticated indeed. “Education” – not formal education, but “public education” – could be the only hope, but it is difficult to define. How do we inculcate a critical spirit in our “public”? How can we make criticality pervasive?

I cite an example from the West? I usually watch the French Channel, TV5. It can air a programme, lasting two hours, with critics discussing works of art or books. They have an audience for it; we don't have one. How do we create one? But is that what we are after? Surely, we don't want to be aping the occidental mode again. I do believe that the traditional arts in Thailand thrive through practice. People put great emphasis on the productive side of the arts, but rather neglect the discursive, critical side of the artistic enterprise. Contemporary society can benefit from abandoning the push-bottom culture and going back to practise the various arts, and at the same time acquiring skills in discoursing critically about the arts we practise. It may be in this way that criticality can be all-pervasive. It simply does not work in our context to fix a demarcation line between practitioners and public (out of which should grow a thriving criticism). Following the West, we may have paid too much attention to Aristotle (and Germanists would not forget Gustav Freytag⁷, who wrote a very rigid set of rules for the theatre and theatre criticism!).

⁷ Gustave Freytag (1816 - 1895), novelist, literary critic and politician, published 'Die Technik des Dramas (The Technique of Drama) in 1863 as a handbook for good drama, which is regarded today to be too dogmatic.

Let me conclude on a personal note. I went to a secondary school that valued manual work very highly. When writing my Ph.D. thesis (in German), I was thinking all the time of my handicraft teacher. He was the one who taught us the meaning of balance and proportion.

I shall write again and respond to the various points raised in your second mail.

With warm regards
Chetana

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From: Chetana Nagavajara

To: Paul Rae

Date: 20 May 2005

Dear Paul,

Allow me to return to your second mail. I did not realise when I translated a few key terms from my native Thai into English, like "public act" or "intellectual", that these would spark off soul-searching reflections on your part. There are cultural roots to explain, and I am asking you to bear with me.

When Ayutthaya was burnt to the ground by the Burmese in 1767, almost all written records were lost, including literary texts. At least that is what official chroniclers have told us. I have always been sceptical about all this. In my view, if a written culture did exist, then surely manuscripts must have been recovered in places other than Ayutthaya, places that did not suffer the same fate. My hypothesis is that our literary culture was mostly oral and that very few works were written down, otherwise they could not have rewritten almost all the important texts from memory in the early years of the Bangkok era. I experienced as a child the art of chanting and narrating from memory, and I came to literature through the oral mode, listening to my grandmother who could recite literary works for hours, filling in the gaps through her own improvisations.

The advent of the printing press and later of democracy brought in a few changes. The notion of "public" or "audience" acquired new dimensions. Critical practice, formerly restricted to intimate circles, had to become a public act, that is to say, you assume responsibility vis-à-vis a larger pool of recipients through writing and publishing your views. Written culture, therefore, has brought constructive changes. In actual practice, however, very few people write criticism, an incurable reticence that remains a major stumbling block both on the "productive" and the "receiving" ends. Our project has not had much success with inducing people to write criticism, but they are willing to join us in discussion groups and seminars. The researchers have to do the writing after these sessions.

My point is that criticism as an act or a process is something to be encouraged. This is where "criticality" comes in. If you know how to react to works of art, to react to other people's criticism, "intellectual force" can be generated. I like your idea of "intellectual publics" very much, for it provides a counterbalance to the all-too-elitist notion of "public intellectuals". My colleagues and I have been talking about the uses of criticism in "public education", meaning a kind of education that awakens the critical spirit among the people. But we have not been successful, because we have little access to the media. I think we shall have to address the role (positive and negative) of the media in our dialogue. What has been your experience?

As regards the dichotomy between "talking" and "doing", I think that criticism cannot do away with the reflective

side of human nature. The German Romantic Friedrich Schlegel spoke of criticism as a "continuum of reflections", and this is very useful. Criticism means you share your thoughts and ideas with other people. Good criticism, once generated, continues to elicit responses (indefinitely?). An intellectual public is supportive of such continuity. At the same time, this "public" benefits from this "continuum of reflections", which is an educational process. Perhaps we could discuss "criticality" in this way.

What still puzzles me is where one draws the line of demarcation between criticism and academic discourse or writing. I suspect the distinction is not typological but functional. Criticism needs not proceed according to definite goals, but academic activities set out to accumulate knowledge which academics analyse and synthesize in the hope of coming up with certain concepts (and theories). Let me be specific. Thai architects, for almost a hundred years, have been trained in the Western model, and they have confessed that they don't know how to enliven traditional Thai architecture, and that what they have been designing are just pale imitations of the works of their forefathers. They would like to have "academics" engage in serious research, and come up with an analysis of the essence of the traditional architecture, so that they can rethink, recreate and innovate. Would you still call this type of activity "criticism", or is this "scholarship", "research"? What is certain is that "research" of this nature still has to engage in a "continuum of reflections".

Your idea about "thinking in front of" is very appropriate. I shall continue going to exhibitions, theatre and concerts, and thinking in front of works of art. Thanks for having warmed up to ideas coming from our research project. By the way, it has been our experience that projects with "pretentious" titles get funding support.

Yours sincerely,
Chetana

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From: Paul Rae
To: Chetana Nagavajara
Date: 2 June 2005

Dear Chetana

Apologies for not having replied sooner. I am writing to you from England, where I have come to have my Ph.D. viva. I'm happy to say that I'm now Doctor Paul Rae!

Let me have a go at answering the same questions as you have.

Criticism – for whom and by whom?

As you have mentioned before with regards to Thailand, in the main, performances do not run for long in Singapore, so often the criticism is after the fact. Actually, that is perhaps an over-simplification. What should be said is that there are different kinds of performances, and that their relationships to criticism are different. The more long-running shows tend to be the more mainstream works, and the main thing readers will be looking out for in a review is whether the show is worth going to see. This may be followed up by a passing interest in who performed well, and possibly if there was any thematic 'relevance' to the performance. There are reviewers working for both the English-language and Chinese-language newspapers. I have a feeling that the Malay and Tamil papers are more occasional in their reviewing.

Other outlets for criticism have much more specific readerships: generally, websites and publications that are put together and put out by specific institutions, such as the university, theatre companies, or arts centres. There are also occasional publications, ceremonial or state-sponsored publications, and the odd guerrilla initiative, like an anonymous satirical publication about the visual arts scene that has recently started appearing.

I'm actually finding it very hard to answer the question! The fact is that criticism, such as it is, appears within broader contexts and initiatives, and it's tricky to tease out who is doing it, for whom.

What makes a critique poor or effective?

Yes, one of the difficulties here is that the question pre-supposes a kind of efficacy to critique, and therefore an implicit instrumentalism. In the context of a highly instrumentalist place like Singapore, one would hope that criticism's job is precisely to continue the conversation – initiated by the artwork – that is defined by resisting instrumentalism (or, as you mentioned a few emails ago, "performance indicators"). On the other hand, there's also a kind of hyper-relativism that one encounters amongst students, for instance, where everyone is right, everyone has the right to have an opinion, and no-one is more right than anyone else. It seems the challenge is to argue for the superior validity of certain critiques over others, without foreclosing on democratic principles. In articulating such an argument, it may become apparent what makes an effective critique. Rather than speculate, however, perhaps I shall say that the things I find "poor" in the critical responses to my own work are: lack of context, lack of an at least partial engagement with the work on its own terms, lack of technical appreciation, lack of consistency, a pre-occupation with judgement over discussion, over-simplification or an over-reliance on academic jargon, and – a personal hobby-horse – no style!

Is there a crisis in criticism in Asia today?

I am suspicious of this question for the following reasons:

1. I do not have enough historical context to appreciate what criticism was in "Asia" prior to the present day (such as it exists, and writers such as Naoki Sakai caution us to be wary here).
2. There is a certain mode of thought in contemporary culture that constantly posits things as being 'in crisis': I have an edited volume published a couple of years ago by Manchester University Press called 'The Theatre in Crisis'. I don't buy it. One of the consequences of Singapore's national ideology of self-reliance is a discourse of constant low-level threat. Singapore – amongst other places – is paranoid. Critique, as you have mentioned, is about learning to be robust.
3. There is probably some etymological relation between 'crisis' and 'critique': perhaps the best bet is to aim to replace crisis with critique!

What are the factors determining the current state of criticism in the theatre, the arts and society?

I agree with you about the refined workings of capitalism and the ways in which it brings about particular effects in apparently unrelated realms such as criticism. I also presume there are cultural factors at play, but it's very hard to speculate on what those are, because the discussion has been distorted in Singapore by the doctrine of so-called "Asian Values".

In what frames can "criticality" be effectively approached and discussed?

Here, again, I follow you. An expanded critical practice in this part of the world must take notice of traditions of orality and experiential learning through copying, repeating, refining. One can note the importance (overlooked in the 'Asian Values' discourse) of aesthetic practice (playing music, writing and reciting poetry) to the development of the rounded Confucian character. Of course, arts appreciation is one of the objectives cited in the syllabi of primary and secondary arts education, but this is alongside the importance of the arts for nation building.

I think an argument remains to be made that 'criticality' is not a negative disposition – in which one spends one's time criticising the acts of others – but an affirmative practice, celebrating that which resists easy understanding or incorporation into pre-existing "frames".

Having now answered the questions, I'm not very satisfied with my answers. I'm not sure why I found them difficult to address, perhaps there's something in the subject matter (criticism) that, even while it is about putting the spotlight on other people and practices, deflects attention from itself. Maybe I'll keep thinking on them ...

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The colloquium, "Critically Speaking: Asia & Europe Contemporary Performing Arts Colloquium", was held at Arts House@The Old Parliament in Singapore between 6 and 7 June 2005. The event was a collaboration between SPAFA, IETM (Informal European Theatre Meeting) and APAAF (Association of Asian Performing Arts Festivals), and was supported by the Asia-Europe Foundation, in association with the Singapore Arts Festival. A summary of the proceedings can be found at http://www.ietm.org/members/downloads.asp?t=Asia+%26+Europe+Performing+Arts+Colloquium%3A+Singapore&item_id=1319

Recommendations for further reading on Criticism:

Barenboim, Daniel and Said, Edward W., *Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

Berger, John, *The Shape of a Packet* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001).

Goenawan Mohamad, *Conversations with Difference: Essays from Tempo Magazine* (Jakarta: PT Tempo Inti Media Tbk, 2002).

Goulish, Matthew, *39 Microlectures: in Proximity of Performance* (Trans. Jennifer Lindsay) (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

Kuo Pao Kun, *Images at the Margins: A Collection of Kuo Pao Kun's Plays* (Singapore: Times Media, 2000).

Krishen Jit, *An Uncommon Position: Selected Writings* (Singapore: Contemporary Asian Art Centre, 2003).

Said, Edward W., *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004)